

Keyword: Utah

Utah: Rocks of ages

IF THE name Dry Fork Coyote Gulch doesn't give fair warning that this is not your average hike, then the haunting drive to the trailhead will remove all doubt. The sandy Hole-in-the-Rock Road is one of the few routes that even attempt to enter the expanse of desert in southern Utah called the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, and when I made a pilgrimage there last summer, I didn't pass a single car. But my total isolation didn't really strike home until I stepped from my 4x4 onto the edge of a mesa above Coyote Gulch, a ravine whose golden sandstone hides three narrow slot canyons. There was nothing but expanses of rock stretching toward the horizon. Only a few stone cairns far below indicated that there was any hiking trail at all.

I'd gone to southern Utah on the trail of an improbable outdoor adventurer Frederick Samuel Dellenbaugh, who at the age of 18 joined the last great voyage of exploration in the Old West.

This Gilded Age Hardy Boy made it through the raw desert in May and June 1872 with a group of amateur explorers. In his later years, Dellenbaugh travelled the world as an artist and writer, and helped to found, in 1904, the esteemed Explorers Club, now in Manhattan.

But I was fascinated by his teenage adventure, when he and his friends found the first route through southern Utah's canyons, discovering the last unknown river in the continental United States, the Escalante, and the last mountain range, the Henrys. They were the first to peer into that phantasmagoric expanse of Bryce Canyon and the first to cross what is now Capitol Reef National Park.

Shortly after starting the Coyote Gulch hike, I had to wonder if I might not disappear into the desert void. I had lost sight of the first stone cairns almost immediately, as I stumbled down to the dry river wash at the bottom of the ravine. After a few false leads, I made it to Peek-a-Boo Canyon, whose hard-to-spot entrance was surrounded by what looked like a shallow pool: I took a step in and sank straight up to my thighs in thick mud.

Hugging the canyon wall for shade, I pressed on heroically and found Spooky Canyon. It was only an 18in-wide crack in the rock, but to me it yawned like the gateway to Shangri-la.

As I squeezed inside, the air was immediately cool. The sky appeared to be an